

Section IV

REENACTOR ORGANIZATIONS

Reenactor umbrella organizations

The trend toward corporatization is increasingly apparent in the reenactor community, shaping reenactors' activities and how they relate to other groups in the field of history.

Although recreational black powder groups like the North-South Skirmish Association and the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association existed as long ago as the 1930s, the first "umbrella" group of avocational reenactors was the Brigade of the American Revolution (BAR), founded in New York state in 1962. For some years, there was a definite split in both the Revolutionary War and Civil War reenactor worlds between those who aligned themselves with organizations like the BAR and those who remained steadfastly outside them. Many individual units resisted the "umbrellas," preferring to keep all unit decisions in their own hands.

In recent years, however, it has become clear that the national and regional umbrella groups are central players in reenactment. Groups not affiliated with an umbrella organization are finding that they may be excluded from some popular events, or that they are shunted to one side during military scenarios because they are not part of the large-scale structures assembled by the umbrella groups. To be a full participant in reenactment, it is increasingly necessary for units to belong to one of these groups.

Nearly all (90%) of the units responding to the survey from this study reported that they belonged to at least one umbrella organization. Just over half (52%) belonged to a single umbrella group. 31% belonged to two different umbrellas, and 7% to three or more. Of the units who reported multiple memberships, the most common pattern was for them to hold membership in the BAR and one other group.

Early umbrella groups (the BAR being a notable exception) tended to be fairly unstable, as their leaders grappled with the tensions between independent local units and the need for a centralized structure that could support military and logistical maneuvering involving thousands of people.¹ But over almost forty years, reenactors have found ways to resolve those tensions and to work with one another and with non-reenactor groups.

Because the growth of the umbrella organizations has direct implications for the National Park Service's dealings with Revolutionary War reenactors, it is worthwhile here to describe the four primary umbrella groups currently operating in the Revolutionary War reenactment community.

➤ **Brigade of the American Revolution (BAR)**

From its beginnings in 1962, the BAR sought to raise standards of safety and authenticity within the whole Revolutionary War reenactment community. This mission alienated (and continues to alienate) some units who resent any type of centralized authority or who reenact primarily for fun. However, the group is remarkably stable, and includes perhaps one-third to one-half of all Revolutionary War reenactors in the U.S., a statistic that suggests it offers substantial benefits to its members.

The BAR hosts encampments, tactical exercises, flintlock competitions, craft demonstrations, and annual training schools and seminars. It publishes a regular newsletter, the *Brigade Courier*, and a quarterly educational journal, *The Brigade Dispatch*. Current membership is about 2,200 reenactors from about 130 units in the U.S., Canada, and Britain.

Member units represent many of the armies that fought during the Revolutionary War, as well as civilians of the time period. The bulk of BAR membership is drawn from three geographical areas centered around New York City, Cleveland, Ohio, and Greensboro, North Carolina. About half of the BAR's member units belong exclusively to the BAR, while half also hold membership in at least one other umbrella organization.

The BAR is governed by a national board made up of ten members elected by the entire membership. Board terms are two years, and most board members typically remain in office for two to five terms. Regional boards oversee the two geographical regions, one in the northeast and a newly-chartered southeast region.

To be admitted as BAR members, groups must carefully document their unit history, clothing, and accouterments. This emphasis on documenting small details has earned the BAR a reputation among some reenactors as "thread counters" or "authenticity Nazis." But BAR leaders are proud of their reputation as sticklers for accuracy, and of their sense that they have been instrumental in improving standards for the entire reenactor community. Once admitted to the BAR, a unit is covered by the umbrella group's insurance policy.

The BAR has no organizational policy on National Park Service events, although one BAR rule does create potential problems for the NPS. The BAR specifically prohibits women portraying "disguised" female soldiers, while the NPS, after a 1991 lawsuit challenging a similar policy at Antietam National Battlefield, must allow women in uniform to take the field. Otherwise, the BAR and NPS have worked together productively at many parks.

URL: <www.brigade.org>

➤ **The British Brigade**

The British Brigade was founded in 1985, as its current leader put it, “to build a little team spirit between British reenactors and train them to be more efficient on the field.” Like many umbrella organizations, it was a response to the fact that large-scale military maneuvers simply are not possible without some type of coordinated command structure. Its emphasis remains on the military aspects of reenactment, unlike the BAR’s more comprehensive approach to education and authenticity.

The British Brigade can currently field up to 800 reenactors from 35 units. Its membership is strongest in the northeast, but it also includes groups from the southern U.S., Canada, and one in England. To join, a group must include at least six men, uniformed alike, who are willing to give the brigade leadership control over what happens on the field during an event.

Like the BAR, the British Brigade is a non-profit organization in the state of New York, governed by a board of directors made up of the commanders of each of the 35 member units. The board chooses the brigade officers each year, including an overall field commander. Only two men have held this top position in the organization’s 14-year history. Other board officers hold positions based on eighteenth century military practice (paymaster, adjutant, quartermaster).

The Brigade hosts two or three events each season, sometimes trying new venues but also returning to places they have enjoyed in previous years. Most of their efforts are coordinated with their brother organization, the Continental Line. The British Brigade also maintains informal but close relations with the BAR.

URL: <www.BritishBrigade.org>

➤ **The Continental Line**

The Continental Line was formed shortly after the British Brigade. When the Brigade made a reenacting trip to England in 1987, a group of Continental reenactors joined them to portray the American side. The camaraderie that developed during this trip led to the decision that it would be worthwhile to have a parallel umbrella group that could both organize Continental units and coordinate events with the British Brigade. From an original nucleus of ten units, current Continental Line membership has grown to 65-70 units.

The Continental Line is essentially a confederation of independent groups. It is run by a board of directors headed by a chairman who serves for two years. This position tends to be filled alternately by reenactors from each of the group’s three regions: north, mid-Atlantic, and south. An adjutant and three departmental coordinators complete the board.

Board members are elected by the membership, with regional coordinators elected by members in their own regions. The chairman selects members for an authenticity committee, as well as liaison officers who maintain official contact with the British Brigade. Continental Line units must furnish their own insurance.

Like all umbrella organizations, the Continental Line struggles with the very American question of how to balance unit autonomy with the need for centralized structure. Unlike the BAR, which prides itself on maintaining very strict organizational requirements for members, or the British Brigade, whose leader admits, “We’ll fight for democracy, but we don’t practice it,” the Continental Line attempts (at least in principle) to leave as much authority as possible at the unit level. Its emphasis is on tactical leadership, and its administrative structures are set up primarily to support efficiency on the field, with a secondary goal of raising authenticity standards for its membership.

Each of the three Continental Line departments holds one or two events per year, generally hosted by a local Line unit. On a national level, the Continental Line usually coordinates two large events per year with the British Brigade. In 1998, the two organizations joined with the BAR and Parks Canada to stage a large-scale event in Quebec City, which many reenactors have pointed to as a model of inter-umbrella cooperation. The same groups ran a similar and highly-successful event in the summer of 1999 at Fortress Louisburg, Nova Scotia.

➤ **Northwest Territory Alliance (NWTa)**

The Northwest Territory Alliance serves as an umbrella for more than forty midwestern Revolutionary War reenactment units. Founded around the time of the national bicentennial, the NWTa now includes about 1,700 military and civilian reenactors from throughout the midwest.

To be admitted as members, units must document the authenticity of their unit history, regulations, clothing, and accouterments. During the first year of membership, new units must field a minimum number of soldiers at NWTa events. Based on the size of the unit, the NWTa determines how many officers the group may field.

The NWTa is run by a board of directions made up of one representative from each of the member units. The board meets bimonthly and is run, like the Continental Line, as an administrative rather than a military hierarchy. The overall commander has a military title but an essentially administrative role. Military command is conferred by the board of directors, usually to a known group of people who have worked closely together in the past.

The NWTa has an extremely busy schedule of encampments, hosting upwards of a dozen events each year. Each of these typically draws 150-200 reenactors. By far the biggest NWTa event is the Spirit of Vincennes Rendezvous, held each Memorial Day weekend in Vincennes, Indiana and described in more detail below.

Because of its geographical distance from the east coast, the NWTa is somewhat distant from national “reenactor politics,” which tend to be based in the east. However, many NWTa units do belong to at least one of the other major umbrella groups, and the NWTa and BAR host one joint event each season. As the umbrella organizations become more national in scope, and as the Internet facilitates communication across distance, midwestern Revolutionary War units seem increasingly connected to their more numerous eastern counterparts.

URL <www.nwta.com/main.html>

➤ **Other umbrella organizations**

There are several smaller and generally more regional umbrella groups, including:

Southern Crown Forces

<www.geocities.com/Pentagon/Quarters/1829>

The Virginia Line

<www.wlu.edu/~valine>

Burning of the Valley Military Association (New York state)

Historic Florida Militia

Living History Association (Vermont)

<www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/9463>

This last organization has attracted a national membership primarily by offering affordable insurance policies for reenactment units.

The growing role of the umbrella organizations

As often happens within communities, reenactors are discovering that structures created for one purpose—in this case, for organizing large-scale military-style performances—may be useful in other situations. Reenactors have become activists in causes connected with history, and the infrastructures of the umbrella organizations have allowed this far-flung community to speak in more unified and effective ways. Ironically, the new technology of the Internet has had an enormous effect in unifying a group of people whose aim is to rediscover the values and lifestyle of the distant past.

Most reenactors strongly prefer to maintain the avocational, non-commercial nature of reenactment. Only 12% of survey respondents in this study said that being paid a fee was

a factor that influenced their decision to participate in events at national parks. And most unit budgets remain modest: of the 49 units who supplied budget figures for this study, 80% had a total budget of \$2,000 or less.

But reenactors do recognize their community's potential to leverage money and attention for causes that are important to them. And they increasingly see and make use of the "in kind" value of their appearances. One reenactor active in the leadership of the Continental Line reports that he tells communities interested in sponsoring reenactments that "We're a cheap date—you can put a minimal amount of money into amenities for the reenactors, and a lot of money into promoting the event to attract big crowds, and everyone will be happy." The umbrella organizations have played an important role in helping reenactors to raise their public profile and expand their range of activities into the areas listed below.

➤ **Public policy and preservation**

Reenactors have taken an active role in public debates and efforts around historic preservation and other policy issues. They have long been vocal in working to save historic sites (especially battlefields) threatened by development. The sizeable profits from most Civil War "mega-events" are now channeled into battlefield preservation.

As already noted in Section I, in the spring of 1999, reenactors became involved in a public policy issue that touched more directly on their own activities. When the Massachusetts legislature approved a new gun law that would have made trigger guards and other safety features mandatory on all weapons in the state, reenactors from throughout New England led a highly-publicized and successful lobbying effort to add an amendment for historical weapons.

➤ **Mass media**

Many reenactors have been involved in film and television projects, from nationally-released films like *Glory* and *Gettysburg* to smaller local productions. The History Channel, indeed, is sometimes jokingly referred to as the Reenactor Channel because of its frequent use of reenactors in staged recreations. Recently, many Revolutionary War reenactors were involved in the filming of the upcoming big-budget movie *The Patriot*, starring Mel Gibson as a fictionalized version of Francis Marion.

A broad coalition of Civil War reenactor organizations came together around the filming of the 1992 movie *Gettysburg* to negotiate with the producers, Turner Network Television. Although they were unsuccessful in their original demands for reenactors to be paid as skilled extras, the coalition did wrest a \$100,000 contribution toward historic preservation from TNT.

➤ **Heritage tourism**

As the reenactment community matures and builds connections with other groups in the heritage world, reenactors are gaining a sense of themselves as an important part of a wider field. They recognize their ability to draw crowds and attention, and they are becoming more savvy about their marketability in the heritage economy.

Many reenactor groups have established working relationships with commercial enterprises and high-profile heritage organizations. One Revolutionary War unit surveyed in this study had participated in Philadelphia's new "Lights of Liberty" sound and light show. Many units had connections with Colonial Williamsburg, either through regular participation there or through unit members employed at Williamsburg.

➤ **Parks Canada**

The partnership between Revolutionary War reenactor organizations and the Canadian national park system is worth noting here for several reasons:

- Some of the largest and most popular Revolutionary War reenactment events in recent years have been held at Canadian national parks.
- This partnership provides a model for looking at how reenactor umbrella organizations work with a national park system.
- It suggests that reenactors are thinking more broadly about the history they present and about the wider heritage field.

Although at first glance it may seem surprising for American Revolutionary War reenactors to be creating a partnership with national parks in another country, the connection reflects the fact that at the time of the Revolution, all of the disputed territory was still British North America, without the national borders that we recognize today. Reenactors savor the chance to reenact on the Plains of Abraham (as they have done twice at recent events in Quebec City) or at Fortress Louisbourg in Nova Scotia, because it gives them a better sense of the world that existed before today's borders were drawn. Many reenactors point out—and try to reflect—the international character of the American Revolution, perhaps as a way of grasping the complex politics of the era, perhaps as a way of reflecting our own increasingly global sense of culture and politics.

Reenactors rate the recent Parks Canada "mega-events" highly. One survey respondent listed the amenities that had made reenactors feel welcomed and valued:

Some things Parks Canada has done to make this a truly successful event include providing meals for the participants, providing additional events for the public, transporting individuals to and from the airport, providing

a complete information packet including instructions for crossing the border, hotels to stay in and the like, a supplemental volunteer staff to service the almost 2,000 reenactors.

Many reenactors who attended the Quebec City events commented on the widespread publicity effort that the city and the park system had coordinated. Television publicity, prominently-displayed billboards, placemats at city restaurants featuring reenactors' images, and other PR strategies brought in enormous crowds of spectators. Some reenactors commented to me that American national parks do not seem to see themselves as engines for heritage tourism to the same extent that Canadian parks appear to.

Finally, battle reenactments are allowed at Parks Canada events, capping their appeal for reenactors.

The Spirit of Vincennes: A park/umbrella partnership

The annual Spirit of Vincennes Rendezvous in Vincennes, Indiana is an example of a highly-successful and long-lasting collaboration between a national park and a reenactor umbrella group, in partnership with civic and other organizations.

Started during the bicentennial in 1977, the Vincennes event commemorates George Rogers Clark's successful raid on a frontier fort. The annual commemoration is a city-wide celebration, centered around a Revolutionary War encampment at George Rogers Clark NHP. The event is now organized and run by a non-profit organization, the Spirit of Vincennes, Inc., made up of representatives from all the groups involved.

Four to five hundred members of the Northwest Territory Alliance (NWTa) camp on the national park for the weekend, staging battle reenactments on land adjacent to the park. This land was purchased around 1980 by the Spirit of Vincennes, Inc., using money raised primarily through fundraising efforts at the annual encampment. The land has now been donated back to the city, which leases it to the event organizers each year. This arrangement has been central in securing the city's support and involvement, a factor (as at the Quebec City events described above) that participants point to as important in the success of the event.

Reenactors and park staff speak of the Spirit of Vincennes with pride and enthusiasm. This is clearly a true community festival involving a wide-ranging partnership among many complementary groups.

Most important for the purposes of this study, it seems clear that the strong connections between the national park, the reenactor umbrella group, and the city have provided a framework for solving the problem of how to attract reenactors to national parks when battle reenactments are not allowed on NPS land. George Rogers Clark NHP is not the only national park that has experimented with holding reenacted battles on nearby

property. But the Vincennes arrangement is unique in that it is permanent, and that it was based on the shared efforts, over time, of many groups of people. The “battlefield” in Vincennes is not a second-best solution to a vexing park/reenactor problem. Rather, it is a public collaboration that emerged from a strong relationship between reenactors and a national park, and that has further strengthened that relationship.

Spirit of Vincennes URL: <users.bestonline.net/fdough/spirit.htm>

This is clearly not the only model that might be used to approach the question of how national parks and reenactor groups can work together more productively. But it strongly suggests several ideas that may be helpful to other parks and to the NPS as a whole:

- Rather than working on unit-by-unit relationships, parks (or the NPS as a whole) should look to the reenactor umbrella organizations as a way to build broader coalitions.
- Finding solutions to current park/reenactor tensions is something that will take time and an investment of effort on the part of everyone involved.
- Both reenactor groups and parks have the potential to mobilize wider interest and support through the various networks they belong to.

Reenactor demographics

A final aspect of the Revolutionary War reenactor community to consider here is the generational change that is beginning to take place within its leadership. At both the unit and umbrella group levels, reenactors born after the baby boom/Vietnam era are starting to emerge as leaders.

Survey data gathered during this study shows that current reenactor leadership is still very much made up of “baby boomers.”

- The average age of survey respondents was 49.
- 72% of all respondents were over the age of 40.
- A substantial majority of respondents (also 72%) were commanders of their units, and many were also active in umbrella groups as well.

However, data on the overall membership of Revolutionary War units shows that the majority of the community is made up of younger reenactors:

- The 17-40 year old age group was largest in 60% of responding units.
- The 40+ age group was largest in 40% of units.

While reenactor leadership is still made up of “baby boomers,” then, these “second generation” reenactors are no longer a majority in the overall reenactor community.

Because reenactment, like all forms of cultural performance, is shaped by changing conditions in the culture that produces it, this generational shift has implications for the character of the community, and for its dealings with organizations like the National Park Service.

For “second generation” reenactors, reenactment often seems to be a way to reconnect with the values and patriotism of the immediate post-World-War-II years, and these values have shaped their performances in important ways. The younger “third generation” reenactors who are beginning to take leadership roles in the community came of age after the era of Vietnam and the turbulent social changes of the 1960s and early 1970s. While all reenactors value patriotism, camaraderie, and historical knowledge, “third generation” reenactors seem to do so in a new ways.

If “baby boomer” reenactors seek to connect with personal visions of honor and integrity in troubled times, their younger counterparts seem motivated more by a desire for community in an ever more fragmented world. Both desires are heartfelt, and share a sense of connection to past communities—especially military ones. But the specific generational tensions that shaped “baby boomer” reenactment are less evident among younger reenactor leaders.

These are large generalizations, which I have not yet quantified or investigated in any methodical way. If they are correct, however, it seems likely that a shift within reenactor leadership—especially at the umbrella level—may present an opportunity for a new type of dialogue between the reenactment community as a whole and the National Park Service. Building on the frameworks created by “second generation” reenactors, these younger men and women are thinking in terms of “skill sets,” broad (even global) networks of communication, and other increasingly sophisticated means of pursuing their avocation.

Reenactment is becoming more corporatized, and it is at the level of the umbrella organizations that the National Park Service may be able to engage in meaningful discussions of the problems and the opportunities presented by the park/reenactor relationship. For instance, although it is crucial for the NPS to clarify that its black powder policies are not *only* about safety, it seems possible that some broad-based dialogue of the parts that *are* safety-related could greatly strengthen and energize park/reenactor relations.

¹ At the recent 135th anniversary event at Gettysburg, for example, more than 20,000 Civil War reenactors portrayed the three-day battle in “real time,” staging scenarios that in some cases replicated the original numbers of combatants on the field. The event was coordinated by a coalition of reenactor and preservation groups that had worked together previously on “mega-events” and had learned a great deal about the logistics of such immense productions.